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ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIPS

228 426 Pearling is a great gamble for everyone concerned. A share may be worth only 50 or 100 rupees if the take has been poor, but on the average a share should net at least several hundred rupees. It must be remembered that a share usually represents a year's earning, since the pearling industry operates on the "debt system." This is not to be confused with the "truck system," for the workers in the Persian Gulf pearl fisheries are not paid in produce. In the debt system the divers and tenders get actual cash advances during the seasons they are out of work, and their families get food and supplies while they dive. They must pay off their incurred debts with their earnings after the pearling season, but somehow they never seem able to get free.

228 426 672 Until recently, a diver who accepted cash advances from a *nakhoda* had doomed himself to diving until death, and unfortunately death might not be an exit, as his debt was simply passed on to his son or brother, who then went on to incur his own debt. Once in debt a diver is prohibited from hiring to another *nakhoda*—he must repay his debt to the man who gave him cash advances. A diver or anyone else who accepts an advance in the pearling industry has sold himself to economic slavery, for the *nakhoda* owns his ability to work, while the man must support himself. Thus, a diver is bound to return to the purgatory of pearling at the *nakhoda's* call. Since Muslim law prohibits interest or usury the debt system effectively gets around this. The *nakhoda* is usually in turn bound to some merchant in the same way, for he has taken cash advances to give to his divers and attendants.

567 465 In Oman the *nakhodas* often hire their labor from a tribal agent, giving the agent an advance of money and rice. In the case of slaves, the agent takes this to the slaves' master; at the end of the season he collects the balance of the slaves' earnings. Thus the slaves' earnings go completely to his master, who in return clothes and feeds him.

228 656 426 On Bahrein Island the Bahrein Government has, at the suggestion of the British, effected many reforms in the pearling industry with respect to the debt system. Hereditary debts have been abolished; pearl divers on Bahrein now take their debts to

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On Bahrein and in Kuweit the governments have made reforms in the pearling industry. On Bahrein a pearl diver's debts now die with him; in other places a diver's debts are passed on to his son or brother. The Bahrein government also demands that account books be kept for each diver, and the cash advances are agreed upon at the beginning of the season.

However, there has been a drastic change in the Persian Gulf pearling industry. The great depression after World War I and the competition from Japanese cultured pearls dealt the pearl fisheries a serious blow. Twenty-five years ago there were nearly three thousand dhows engaged in pearling in the Persian Gulf; today there are not more than six hundred. In the twenties the east-coast ports of Saudi Arabia probably sent several hundred boats to the pearl fisheries annually; today there are not more than several dozen. In the twenties the value of the Persian Gulf pearl fisheries was more than a million dollars; today it is less than a quarter of a million.

Thousands of divers and attendants were thrown out of work. In Kuweit numerous pearlers found employment on sailing ships traveling to India and Africa. On Bahrein Island many were absorbed by the rapidly expanding oil industry. In Saudi Arabia oil development came late, and the unemployed pearlers had already been absorbed as fishermen, rock miners, and farmers; in fact, so well adjusted were the Saudi Arabian towns that when the Arabian American Oil Company needed large amounts of labor in 1945, it had to hire Bedouins from the desert. Oil came late to Kuweit also; however, here workers were drawn from the marine industries, since the Kuweit Oil Company paid higher wages than the workers could get as sailors, pearlers, or fishermen.

Oil has thus been able to offer salvation to the lowly coastal worker of the Persian Gulf. A man in debt can now get a job with an oil company and pay off his debt. So effective has this proved that the Kuweit, Bahrein, and Saudi Arabian nakhodas have difficulty in getting men to send to the pearl fisheries, or to man the sailing ships going to India and Africa. However, oil has yet to come to Oman, so that pearlers still leave the Trucial Coast in large numbers, and many Oman dhows from Sur still sail down to Africa.